Element 4:
Policies--General Policies
UPLIFT Public Library Administration, Spring 2005

>Policies are the principle vehicle for mediating relationships between the library and the public, and how well they work, how they are enforced, and the subtle messages they convey about the philosophy and management of the library will play a significant role in shaping the public=s perception of the library.

>Good policies should meet the following criteria: 1) The policy advances the library mission; 2) The policy is clear; 3) The basis for the policy is reasonable; 4) The policy can be enforced consistently; and, 5) The policy does not create burdens that outweigh its advantages. Overall, when considered as a whole, it is probably best to strive for the most minimal set of policies which achieve necessary administrative ends.

>There is no single set of Aright≅ or Abest≅ policies. In establishing policies, each library must take into account its history, clientele, administrative needs, staffing level and mission. At the same time, administrators should constantly be aware of policies which are being adopted by other libraries in order to make sure they are considering a wide range of options and not limiting their view based on their own in-library experiences.

>In considering history, administrators must remember the human desire for stability and be cautious about changing policies to which patrons are accustomed without having a sound reason for doing so. In considering staffing levels, administrators should refrain from creating policies which, regardless of how valid they are theoretically, create an unworkable burden for the staff, especially if the burden of enforcing policies interferes with carrying out core library functions.

>Administrators must be aware that it is always easier, in terms of public relations, to increase, rather than restrict options and freedom for patrons. In modifying existing policies, attempt to expand choices and options, and reduce them only when the need to do is clear and will result in substantive operational gains. In establishing new policies, if there is uncertainty about how it will work or how it may need to be modified in the future, incline to the more restrictive option initially and loosen the policy if experience so dictates, rather than starting out more open and having to tighten later.

>Test all policies for their legal merits, especially those that relate to the creation of Apublic forums,≅ such as meeting room policies and bulletin board policies. Remember that in sensitive areas, addressing them with policy changes after a problem arises can appear reactive and prejudicial and can create additional legal exposure.

>The best and most carefully crafted policies without appropriate staff training on how to apply them will not serve the library=s best interest. Make training a priority, being careful to explain the purposes of a policy on which a staff member seems uncertain. Also be certain to define those areas in which strict compliance is required and those in which designated staff members may use discretion and permit variation according to circumstances.

>Similarly, the board must be thoroughly informed about the library=s policies and the reasoning behind them. The board should also review all policies on a regular schedule--for example, every three years--to make sure that the reasons for policies remain convincing to, and supported by the current board and that simple inertia has not allowed to go unaddressed a policy which no longer reflects actual day-to-day library practices.